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ABSTRACT

During interviews conducted with Janet Emig, the true identity of "Lynn," the primary subject of Emig's influential 1971 monograph "The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders," was determined. Discovery of Susan Gzech's true identity led to an interview which shed some interesting light on Emig's case study and on composition instruction as well. Besides attaining a law degree and practicing for many years, Susan also is a social activist. Her success should not surprise any of Emig's readers, since Emig noted "Lynn's" talents and potential. Susan the adult has, however, greatly altered her writing process from her school days of little or no planning, drafting, and no revision. Today, she outlines, researches, and plans in depth, reflecting the fact that engagement and commitment prompt effort. Generally, Susan's experience with writing instruction in high school and college was unsatisfactory, with its main effect being a feeling of insecurity about her writing. Susan's experiences suggest that several popular notions about the teaching of writing are simply wrong. Instead of gaining skills from educational institutions, she received most of her encouragement from family reading and social functions, underscoring the theory that literacy education exists beyond classroom walls, and that teachers should move toward a more holistic conception of literacy. Finally, two major criticisms of Emig's book, from Stephen North and Ralph Voss, appear unacceptable based on the interviews with Susan. (HB)

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"An Oral History of Janet Emig's Case Study Subject 'Lynn'"
By Gerald Nelms
Conference on College Composition and Communication,
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I was never a student of Janet Emig's, at least not formally. I learned from her as most of the rest of us have learned from her: through her talks and writings. But in 1989 and in the spring of 1990, I began to learn from Janet Emig through conversations we conducted for a case history of her that I included in my dissertation. During our interviews, Janet provided me with the real name of "Lynn," the primary subject of her influential 1971 monograph The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. Last year, while teaching my research methods class at Southern Illinois University, I mentioned "Lynn's" real name to a group of graduate students in the class. One of my students, Marjorie Winther, amazingly actually knew "Lynn." In fact, Margie said to me, "You know, I thought Lynn might be her." Through what Margie refers to as a network of Jewish mothers in Chicago, I received "Lynn's" address and phone number. This began my study of Janet Emig's "Lynn," our field's most famous case study subject.

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Lynn's real name is Susan Gzesh. (And I have her permission to use her real name.) While Susan has very little memory of Janet Emig's study of her, interviewing "Lynn" again does shed some interesting light on Emig's case study of her and on other aspects of composition study and composition instruction as well.

First, let me update you on what has happened to "Lynn" during the past twenty-three years, since Emig's study of her. After high school, Susan attended the University of Chicago, graduating in 1972. During her final year of college, after discovering that she had enough credit hours to graduate and that all she needed to do was write her senior paper, Susan spent the winter in Cuernavaca, Mexico, with her sister's high school class. There she began to learn Spanish and subsequently, became fluent in the language. After college, she spent a year in Europe and then returned home to decide on a career. She considered becoming a social worker, but, as she puts it, "there were enough Jewish women social workers" at the time. So she entered law, "because," she says, "it seemed like lawyers had more power to do things." In 1977, Susan received her law degree from the University of Michigan, having won the Jane Mixer Social Justice Award. Her ability to speak Spanish helped her get summer jobs representing migrant workers, and subsequently, she worked in several legal assistance firms. She specializes in immigration law. In 1986, Susan became a staff attorney in the Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, specializing in cases involving police brutality, immigration, and access to the political process. While there, she developed the Project to Combat Hate Violence. Her most famous case was her defense of Dennis Brutus, the black South African who fought deportation from the U.S. in the early 1980s. Throughout her career as lawyer,

Susan Gzesh also has taught law as a visiting professor at various universities, including DePaul and Iowa. In 1990, she taught immigration law and labor policy at the University of Guadalajara in Mexico. Just this year, she began teaching law at the University of Michigan full time. She commutes from Chicago, where she lives with her three-year-old son and her husband, who himself continues to work for the Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights.

As should be obvious, Susan Gzesh is a social activist. Even her attitude toward her career change points up her activism. She says:

I have a basically Robin Hood-like attitude toward institutions like the University of Michigan Immigration has actually proved to be a very popular area for lawyers in corporate firms to do pro bono representation. So there aren't really particularly big contradictions in my teaching there There are so many sectors of the population who are underrepresented and in dire need of competent legal representation. Trying to get people to do that is honorable."

As a social activist, Susan recognizes the importance of writing. She says, "[As a lawyer,] you have a very important goal that you want your writing to accomplish, and the stakes are much higher [than when writing in school or college]. You're representing someone else's interest. It's not just a question of whether I'm going to get a B or an A- on something." In addition to the daily writing that Susan did as a practicing lawyer, she also published several articles, chapters of books, seminar materials for the National Lawyers

Guild, and reports of studies and investigatory trips along the U.S.-Mexican border.

For those of us who know Susan Gzesh as "Lynn" through Janet Emig's monograph, little of this should come as a surprise.

Emig described the adolescent "Lynn" as "vivacious,"

"perceptive," "attuned to herself and her world,"

"exceptionally interesting

. . . because of her self-knowledge and her ability to verbalize the process of her thinking and writing," "an extremely poised, assured, and open writer, occasionally skeptical about what she has done or what she plans to do but never so negative about a specific piece of work nor of her ability in general that she stops trying in disgust or defeat. Her ego-strength," Emig writes, "seems great enough for her to believe that she can complete any assigned writing task, not only adequately but skillfully enough to please herself and her evaluator, whoever the evaluator may be." These descriptions still fit the adult "Lynn"; in fact, they fit her more so now, I think.

What has changed is the writing process she typically uses. As an adolescent, we recall, "Lynn" used what Emig called a "Marching-through-Georgia" process--a description, by the way, that the adult Susan was amused by and found very apt. The adolescent "Lynn's" process typically consisted of little or no planning, drafting the document, and no revision. As an adult, Susan spends a great deal of time researching and

planning and revising her major pieces of writing. She virtually always outlines the longer pieces that she writes. She now does most of her writing on the computer, although she likes to make revisions on hard copy. She prefers long stretches of uninterrupted time to write. As a practicing lawyer, she would often spend Saturdays in the quiet of her office writing in order to avoid distractions.

The reasons for the change in her writing processes are clear. They are the same ones that inform similar changes in many writers as we move from the artificial, abnormal hothouse of the academic classroom to the world of writing from genuine intellectual commitments. Engagement and commitment prompt more planning and revision. The failure of schools to engage students in their writing is a problem many composition scholars first concerned themselves with after reading Janet's monograph. It is one that composition teachers grapple with daily--one we have as a scholarly field yet to synthesize and resolve.

But several aspects of Susan's composing haven't changed. These are the aspects that not only describe her writing process but her personality as well. For the adolescent "Lynn," we recall, writing was, to quote Emig, "a task to be done like any other, and one simply gets on with it." Likewise, for the adult Susan, writing is simply a vehicle for dispensing her ideas and a tool for accomplishing her tasks. She still writes almost exclusively in the extensive mode.

She still feels more comfortable with oral communication than with writing. She says:

I've always been more successful as a speaker than as a writer. I'm always interested in talking to people, communicating ideas, and I know that even if I think of myself as a political activist, I could be a greater speaker, but there are only so many people I can talk to, and that if I'm serious about getting my ideas across, committing them to writing is a more effective means of communication. It's just harder.

The adult Susan, like the adolescent "Lynn," is always concerned with her audience. Emig wrote that "Lynn proceeds as if what she writes will find an audience--and one wider than a single teacher or investigator." Susan tells me that she virtually cannot proceed in writing unless she has a fairly distinct idea of who her audience is going to be. Writing, for the adult Susan as for the adolescent "Lynn," is simply the expression of ideas, not a way to discover them. As aware and sensitive to writing as she is, Susan views writing as having no end in itself, as being subordinate to her activism.

Ironically, as successful as Susan Gzesh has been, it must be said that formal education in writing had little to do with that success. Janet Emig has been criticized over the years for what she said about teachers in the "Implications" section of her monograph. Janet has criticized herself for the harsh tone of that section--but not for the content of what she had to say. And rightly so. Susan Gzesh's description of her own formal education, though not intended as such, represents a harsh indictment of her English and composition teachers and

her high school and college education generally. As Emig pointed out, about the only positive aspects of writing that the adolescent "Lynn" learned in high school was the directive to be "clear, concise, and memorable." She told Emig, "I had an English teacher [this was her 10th-grade teacher] who was always telling us to be concise, and she loved Melville who was anything but concise. But I guess I'm no Melville so I'll have make it concise." This directive has remained with Susan into her adult writing. She recalls it vividly. For Susan, writing remains simply a vehicle for thought; for her, writing is not a mode of learning.

The adult Susan also vividly recalls the unfortunate teaching methods of some of her other English instructors. There was, for instance, her 11th-grade teacher, whose "method of teaching," she says, "was to read out loud to us from prepared outlines, and we had mimeographed copies of the outlines with some of the words missing. We were supposed to fill in the blank. That was the kind of writing we did [for that class]." The effects of this sort of pedagogy remain. Susan tells me, "Had I had a different sort of high school education, I probably would have looked at writing somewhat differently. I don't think I ever really got, at any point in my education, a real appreciation for the craft of writing, of how you work at writing The process of writing was something that was never held up to me."

Her senior year, she took a course in English composition at a local junior college. About all that she remembers of that class is reading some James Fenimore Cooper that was represented to her as bad writing. She says:

Whether this was the fashion in teaching at the time, I don't know, but that's what I remember about that class. Who taught it? I don't remember if it was a man or a woman. I don't remember really what we wrote. But we did have particular exercises to do: write a piece of a particular kind of writing; or, write 250 words describing something.

Nor was writing process discussed with her in college. The University of Chicago didn't have a required composition course. To be fair, as Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb point out in Programs That Work, edited by Toby Fulwiler and Art Young, this situation has changed somewhat over the last decade. Chicago does have an Advanced Professional and Academic Writing course now for juniors, seniors, graduate, and postdoctoral students, and they have "Writing Interns" helping out with the teaching of their first-year Humanities Core. Still, Susan is critical of their attitude toward writing, the attitude which says that "if you're smart enough to get in there, you know how to write, which," she emphatically adds, "is not necessarily true." She has no memory of ever being asked to revise any of her college writing. Writing simply wasn't discussed, even in talks with her advisor while writing her junior and senior papers.

The main effect of our failure to discuss language with Susan Gzesh was a feeling of insecurity about her writing that she did not get over until recently. She says:

I always felt uneasy about whether I had, the word that comes to mind is, craft. I have always felt confident about my ideas, but I was never sure whether the actual product was a sufficient representation of the ideas that I had. And I remember once using the image of an iceberg, that I felt that my writing was 7/8s below water and 1/8 above water. The craft of writing was difficult And so, I would do what people usually do when they're insecure: procrastinate, and then put things together at the last minute and not be completely satisfied with the product.

How did Susan finally rid herself of that insecurity? Not with the help of anyone--and certainly, not with the help of anyone in the teaching profession. It happened finally after she had been a lawyer for seven years. She says:

I was very insecure about my legal writing for years, partly because I felt like I never had good feedback from people who were supposed to be supervising me I didn't have anybody who really worked with me on my writing during the whole of the early part of my career. Finally, about 7 years ago, I realized that I had been teaching myself to write and that my writing was pretty good, partly because I got into a firm with a couple of lawyers who were a little bit older than me, and I read their stuff and said, "This is garbage. I can write better than this." So, I realized that after years of having really wanted someone to mentor my writing and not ever having that, I figured it out on my own. But it took a long time.

It is important to note here that Susan did a lot of expository writing in college; it wasn't any absence of opportunities to write that caused her writing apprehension--or at least permitted it to continue. It was the absence of discussion about writing processes.

Susan Gzesh's literacy experiences suggest that several popular notions about the teaching of writing are simply wrong. The idea that writers are born, not made, may have some validity, but born writers can also be unmade, and we

teachers of composition may sometimes contribute to that un-making. Also, the idea that all writing instructors need to do is provide opportunities for students to write represents an irresponsible oversimplification. What would have helped Susan Gzesh most during her education was talk about writing processes: about what successful writers do; about what changes she could make in her own processes to improve her writing.

It may well be that Susan Gzesh's experiences or, more accurately, lack of experiences with writing instruction are atypical, but I doubt it. I suspect that there are many students who experience the same insecurities about their writing. Indeed, I have known in my own experience students, no less gifted than Susan Gzesh, whose insecurities about their own writing have left them so blocked that I have spent whole terms just building up their self-esteem enough that they could finally write a full essay. I can imagine students, no less gifted than Susan Gzesh but no less insecure either, ending up not nearly as successful as she has been. The adolescent "Lynn," in fact, told us about several in her high school. There was Susie, a girl in Lynn's class, who wrote imaginatively but was not always technically correct. Revealing both a natural sensitivity to language and an emerging social conscience, the adolescent "Lynn" finds injustice in their teachers' responses to students like Susie.

What saved Susan, what helped her succeed, despite school, if you will, were literacy events that occurred outside of the classroom, in her home, in her community, and in extracurricular activities sponsored by her school. There was a third-grade (though not assigned in class) comedy sketch, based on a Stan Freiberg satire of "Dragnet" that she and three other children scripted and performed. There were the literacy activities she was involved in with the Jewish Community Center Youth Groups. Susan especially remembers the song competitions, where groups of six or seven youngsters, representing different chapters of B'nai Brith, would take popular songs and put new lyrics to them. Mandy Patimpkin, by the way, was in a group with Susan's brother's and was a star of his competition. There was her work as co-editor of her high school yearbook.

We may want to conclude that Susan was simply born smart and born lucky to have smart, middle-class parents. But, I would argue, that there's something more that went on there, too; there was a community of readers. Susan was the eldest of four children. She recalls the difficulties she had studying:

We had a fairly small house with four kids in it. It was pretty chaotic most of the time. I never had my own room. I remember trying to do chemistry homework in high school, which was very difficult, and yelling down the stairs, "Turn off the television!" I had fantasies about moving out to the garden equipment shed in the backyard just to get some peace and quiet.

Yet, as chaotic as her home was, one very important feature of her childhood stands out. Susan says it best herself:

We always read a lot when we were kids. We were encouraged to read. My parents were both children of immigrants, so they were the first people in their families to go to college. My mother particularly pushed our reading of classics, some of which I read and some of which I was not interested in but I read a lot. I read all the Alcott stuff. I read Robert Louis Stevenson. I read everything that Jules Verne wrote. I read George Orwell's 1984 when I was ten years old. I know I didn't understand the sex scenes at all, and I didn't understand the politics, but I liked it as a story. So, I think that the most I got from my family was a big emphasis on reading. We did not do much, if anything, in terms of writing . . . , probably because my dad was working all the time, and my mom was working part-time, and they had four kids. There just wasn't a lot of time for that. But there was lots of reading.

Susan recalls some of the reading she did as a child:

Ferdinand, the Bull and the Madeline stories; biographies of famous people, like Abe Lincoln, Rail-Splitter. "I read all those," she says. Then the classics started. I read Little Women. I read Jane Eyre." And there was the library. From an early age, Susan's mother took her to the library and brought home books. Susan recalls "going to a fairly large library not very close to our home when I was a little kid, and then when I was old enough to start going places on my own in the neighborhood (I was probably nine or ten), a new library opened up closer to our house that I could go to by myself. And then we had a good library at school where we were allowed to check things out in grade school. There were a lot of sources for us to get books."

The importance for Susan of literacy experiences outside of school, at home and in her community, underscores again the conclusions that Shirley Brice Heath and others have come to:

that literacy education exists beyond classroom walls and sometimes may not exist within classroom walls, that we should be moving toward a more holistic conception of literacy education, one that includes, rather than excludes, home and community.

Finally, I'd like to briefly address two major criticisms that have been made of The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. Stephen North recently questioned Janet's judgment that the adolescent "Lynn" avoided expressing her feelings. North basically suggests that Janet was jumping to conclusions based on too little evidence. Janet describes it as an insight based on interviews with her subject. After reading both Janet's description and North's criticism, Susan said to me that she believes Janet was more correct in her conclusion. Susan does believe that most adolescents avoid expressing their feelings, but she admits, "My husband would probably say that that's true [of me] today."

Concerning Ralph Voss' claim that the researcher's presence as an authority figure caused the subject to have feelings of guilt about choosing an easy topic to write on, Susan discounts it out of hand and offers a much more cogent analysis:

There's always a tension as to whether what's expected of you is that you do something that conforms to an objective scale or whether you do something that is challenging to yourself. And if you're in a school system where what you're supposed to do is get A's and it's very easy to get A's, then you feel a little guilty about it, because you don't have to work very hard. But you're still getting A's, you know? So, a teacher would tacitly disapprove of your

taking an easy route? Well, yeah, maybe, but that was the ethos of the system. You just did what you needed to do . . . That she [Emig] made me feel guilty about choosing an easy topic? Nah, I don't think so.

Voss also suggests that the use of composing-aloud protocols and the presence of the researcher during composing skewed the results of this case study. In the case of "Lynn," neither appears to have had any effect. Susan says, "I don't think it [composing aloud] would have made things more difficult for me. It's always been easier for me to talk than write." Nor does she have any memory of being bothered by the presence of either Emig or her tape recorder.

As a final word, we need to realize that, as important as Janet Emig's case study of "Lynn" has been for our field, for the adolescent subject herself, it meant very little; it was simply one more activity in a very busy life. For the adult Susan Gzesh, it may mean a little more. She has been very supportive and even eager to talk about her composition education and her writing. But in the end, for the adult "Lynn," writing remains subordinate to social action and political change.